

Ben Cassell, *Collective Memories and experiencing the geranos*

*dance: Sensory and cognitive considerations.*¹

Abstract

During the height of Athenian influence on Delos, the island hosted to a number of sacred delegations (theōriai) sent by the city-state. This paper, in line with recent trends in the study of Collective Memory, will examine how the phenomenological experience of one of the most famous of these delegations, the so-called ‘geranos’ dance, enabled differing forms of collective memory in its participants and audience. In doing so, I shall consider the intersecting material, sensory and cognitive parameters that would allow for the generation and/or re-iteration of distinct communal identities, most prominently Athenian and Delian. However, I will also consider the role of the dance, as an act of Thesean mimeses, in enabling the group identity of its performing epheboi as maturing Athenian citizens.

From the sixth century BC, Athenian activity on Delos became increasingly hegemonic. Throughout the fifth and fourth BC centuries this was most prominently exhibited in the mass purifications of the island and elaborate re-establishment of the *penteteric*² Delia.³ As shared point of reference within the Cycladic islands, and notions of Ionian identity, Delos provided the perfect arena in which Athens communicated and defined her hierarchical relationship within the Delian League.⁴ As has been argued by various scholars, these power structures were vividly exhibited in the various *theōric* delegations dispatched to Delos, all of which promoted notions of Athens’ important role in the cultic history of the island. One of these was the annual

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² (Of ancient Greek festivals) occurring every fifth year.

³ See Constantakopoulou 2007: 63-76; 2016, 105-38; Olivieri 2014; Rutherford 2004: 82-86; 2013: 304-6.

⁴ See Kowalzig 2007, most especially 110-28 and Connor 1993: 195-99.

commemoration of Theseus' landing on Delos. During the fifth-fourth centuries BC, Theseus, slayer of the Minotaur, founder of proto-democracy and defender of Athens, was promoted as the hero *par excellence* of the city-state.⁵ Indeed the Athenian hero as 'another Herakles'⁶ became an emblem of Athens within Pan-Hellenic contexts. The *theoria* to Delos was overtly commemorative in nature constituting a 'particularly orchestrated, physical, re-enactment of myth'⁷ including the performance of the *geranos* dance around the famous *keraton* altar. Plato describes it originating in the prayers offered to Apollo for the safe passage of Theseus and the twice-seven youths, while the same ship from the Cretan expedition was used by the delegation.⁸ Aristotle uses the term ἡθέους (youths) to describe the *epheboi* (male adolescents) that made up the choir sent to Delos, while Bacchylides employs the same word to describe the entire group of the Twice-Seven.⁹ While mixed choirs, and choirs of fourteen, are not attested in Athens, mixed dancing amongst young men and women of marriageable age did exist, and I find it hard to believe that in the re-enactive performance of the *geranos* the roles of the seven maidens were not represented.¹⁰

The initiation of the *geranos* dance is firmly attributed to Theseus by Callimachus, Plutarch and Pollux. Plutarch also states that the Delians still perform it in his day, which has been interpreted as the dance being performed by the specialist choir known as the Delian Maidens. However, Chankowski's

⁵ For wide ranging studies see Brommer 1982, Calame 1996, Walker 1995, Ward 1970.

⁶ Plut. *Thes.*29.3.

⁷ Kowalzig 2007: 92. See also Calame 1996: 158-62.

⁸ Pl. *Phd.* 58b.5-c.10. Shapiro 2019: 21-22; Walker 1995: 43.

⁹ Ath. *Pol.* 56.3; Bacchyl. 17 *passim*; see Parker 2005: 81 for discussion.

¹⁰ Pl. *Leg.* 771e-772a; See also Hedreen 2011: 503-8 and Parker 2005: 82.

detailed reconstruction of this *theoria* and argument for an Athenian choir performing the *geranos* during the sixth-fourth centuries BC.¹¹ Here, I want to consider the *geranos* dance in relation to generation of differing collective memories. Indeed, by examining the kinaesthetic, sensory and physical environment of ritual performance, we are provided with a clearer point of departure in considering its formative force. In this case we are better able to understand how the *geranos* could embed the cultural memory of Theseus through embodied action and experience, whilst providing the perfect conditions by which communicative/episodic group memory is created.

In doing so, I shall concentrate on the role of cognitive resource depletion and deprivation in ritual which has been indicated by Uffe Schjødt, Dimitris Xygalatas and others as a vital mode of analysis in investigating religious experience.¹² Cognitive resource depletion/deprivation refers to the way the brain's executive functions can be negated and subsumed due to high demands on attention. This in turn impacts the brain's ability to update its predictive models of the world, as conducted through the senses.¹³ Essentially, ritual features that cause cognitive resource depletion/deprivation enhance participants' susceptibility to suggested memories and collective, socially mediated, narratives.¹⁴ Along the depletion pathway, attentional focus on features such as physical exertion, emotion regulation and sensory arousal mean that episodic group memories of the event are constructed post-ritual via collective gossip and authoritative interpretation. The deprivation pathway includes features that allow for prior expectations and knowledge

¹¹ Chankowski 2008: pp.114-115.

¹² Xygalatas et al 2013; Konvalinka et al 2011; Schjødt et al 2013; Schjødt 2019.

¹³ Schjødt et al 2013: 39-42.

¹⁴ Schjødt et al 2013: 42.

schema, including cultural memory, to dominate the experience of the ritual. This includes sensorially negating aspects such as darkness and noise, and the support of expectations through material culture and religious/charismatic authorities.¹⁵ Here pre-installed suggestions dominate subjective experience.

In its kinaesthetic and environmental framework, the performance of the *geranos* dance aligns with the conditions required of cognitive resource depletion and deprivation. The timing of the dance, in the dark of night, aligns with sensory limitations - characteristic of the deprivation pathway. Immediately preceding his specific description of the *geranos*, Callimachus describes the evening star Hesperos passing over Delos and hearing choral singing and the stamping of dancing feet.¹⁶ The notion of night-time performance for the dance is also suggested by Delian itineraries which list accessories that accompanied choral singing at various festivals within the sanctuary. Dating from the late fourth-century BC onwards, these lists continuously mention olive oil, wicks and lamps (ἔλαιον καὶ ἐλλύχνια τοῖς φανοῖς) in association with choruses.¹⁷ While the Thesean *theoria* is not specifically mentioned, night-time choral performance is indicated as the norm on Delos. If the *geranos* was indeed conducted at night and in torch light, then at its most fundamental level it provided a sensorially depriving experience in which prior expectations and knowledge could dominate the experience of the dance. This includes culturally shared schema and would relate to an understanding of Theseus' actions on Delos.¹⁸

¹⁵ Schjødt 2019: 367-68.

¹⁶ Callim. *Delos*. 455-460.

¹⁷ *ID* 316.70-80; 338. 17-25 (face A); 442. 189; *IG* II² 161b 61-62. Arnold 1933: 455.

¹⁸ Beim 2007: 1-23.

In line with the conditions of cognitive resource deprivation, these pre-installed expectations would have also been supported by the presence of authoritative figures. The most obvious of these would of course be the choir leaders who had selected and trained the performers. While not related to this particular *theoria*, the arrival of Nikias as chorus leader onto Delos in 421 or 417 BC certainly suggests the charismatic quality of this role.¹⁹ While Theseus' Delian episode would likely have been known to the performers, in specifically training for its re-enactment the chorus leaders would have helped to form an embodied understanding of this cultural memory. Their presence at the dance would in turn deprive the performers of their ability to update these prior expectations as based on any conflicting sensory information - which would itself be deprived due to darkness. This same process would also be supported by the fact that while likely familiar with night-time ritual activity, the sanctuary would have been an unknown physical space for the dancers. Nevertheless, the *geranos* was performed in relation to recognized physical traces that evidenced Theseus' activity on the island.

Both Callimachus and Plutarch associate the initial performance of the *geranos* with the simultaneous dedication of a statue of Aphrodite given to Theseus by Ariadne.²⁰ Along with this very specific mnemonic trace, the *keraton* altar would have acted as a physical authority by which the experience of the *geranos* would have matched the dancer's prior expectations regarding the Thesean original and dominated their individual

¹⁹ Plut. *Nic.* 3.5-6.

²⁰ Plu. *Thes.* 21.1-2; Callim. *Delos.* 305-15. Pausanias describes this statue as exhibiting an antique nature due to its not having feet (Paus. 9.40.2).

subjectivity. Moreover, in commemorating this event through mimesis, while sensorially deprived, and in relation to its physical traces, the *geranos* indicates the perfect conditions by which this cultural memory could become generated through embodied action.²¹ Examinations of collective cultural memory have begun to emphasize its contextually specific and experiential nature.²² In this sense, objects such the statue of Aphrodite and the *keraton*, provide avenues by which culturally shared memories are generated, not simply through semantic understanding, but by providing a physical index that allows for an embodied experience of the past.²³ In performing the dance the youths would themselves become what Jan Assmann calls 'bearers' of this cultural memory, owing to the fact that comparatively few Athenians would engage with these physical traces or the *geranos*.²⁴

As well as deprivation, features of the *geranos* also align with the conditions of cognitive resource depletion. Again, this means that features of the ritual affect the attentional and executive cognitive resources in such a way that predictive models based on sensory information are inhibited.²⁵ This in turn impedes the construction of precise individual memory, instead creating the need for post-ritual memory construction through group recollections. Physical exertion and emotion regulation are identified as producing cognitive resource depletion and would have clearly framed the experienced of performing the *geranos*.

²¹ Connerton 1989: 73; Jones 2007: 22-26; Hewer and Roberts 2012: 175-77.

²² Knowles 2009: 16; Peterson 2013: 272-78.

²³ Alcock 2002: 28-32; Jones 2007: 40-46.

²⁴ Assmann 2012: 41.

²⁵ Schjødt 2019: 367-68, 373.

Importantly the dance is described as intricate, winding, and fast paced, with both Callimachus and Plutarch the dance is circular and conducted around the *keraton*.²⁶ Plutarch also notes it involving rhythmic alterations and overlapping movements between the dancers as they mimicked the layout of the labyrinth.²⁷ We should also note the testimony of Pollux, who describes the *geranos* as being performed with dancers beside one another in two columns, and with leaders holding the end position on either side.²⁸ If the dancers were segmented into two lines of seven, then the description of Pollux would match that of Plutarch who has them overlapping and possibly shifting direction. Another late source, Eustathius of Thessaloniki, also stresses its rapidity and tempo.²⁹ We should also note that while Herodotus use of the word *labrythos* applies to confusing and interconnected passages, Plato specifically uses it to illustrate an argument that circles and bends around backwards on to itself.³⁰ Interestingly, for this point, the word ‘*geranos*’ (crane) can also be translated ‘to wind’.³¹

Far from being a simple circulation around the *keraton*, the *geranos* is demonstrated as being intricate and vigorous in its re-production of the labyrinth’s passages, going in circular, intertwining and possibly bi-directional motions. The picture presented by these sources strongly suggests that the physical performance of the dance would cause the forms of increased attentional load that inhibit precise individual memory and support the

²⁶ Plut. *Thes.* 21.2; Callim, *Del*, 465-75.

²⁷ Plut. *Thes.* 21.1 (ἐν τινὶ ῥυθμῷ παραλλάξεις καὶ ἀνελίξεις ἔχοντι γιγνομένην).

²⁸ Poll. *Onom.* 4.101.

²⁹ Eust. *Com. ad Hom.* 1166.

³⁰ Hdt. 2.148; Plat. *Euthyd.* 291b (περικάμπτω).

³¹ Lawler 1946: 112.

generation of collective episodic memory.³² This process would also be supported in the fact that the performers would experience the types of expressive and emotional regulation that demand post-ritual memory construction. As is well known in Plato's *Laws*, choral training and performance are a central component of the *paideia* in developing a balanced personality.³³ Regulation of emotion is here a central benefit of choral training - through song and dance one is 'rightly trained in pleasure (ἡδονῶν) and pain' (καὶ λυπῶν). Essentially, while pleasurable to both performers and audience, choruses are tools by which emotional discipline is trained and practised.

Exertive and synchronized movement in small groups, has been shown to form immediate bonds in its performers. This is attributed to the physiological and psychological 'blurring of the self and other', something supported in the dancers performing as the Twice-Seven.³⁴ The demand for expressive regulation while dancing in complicated and energetic movements would mean the *geranos* negated the ability to create strong individual memories. Yet in their post-ritual reflection, the bonds formed with fellow dancers would allow for shared episodic memories to take shape over time.

So far, I have considered the experience of the *geranos* from the perspective of its performers. What about the audience? How did observing the dance aid in generating collective memories in its differing members? While more tentative, we may reach some general conclusions. It is of course important to note that the performance of the *geranos* would have been

³² Schjødt et al 2013: 42; Xygalatas et al 2013: 11.

³³ Plat. *Laws*. 683b-654d.

³⁴ Tarr 2015: 1-3.

attended by a diverse audience; including local Delians, stationed, and visiting Athenians and others from across the Cyclades.³⁵ As an explicit commemorative performance, the *geranos* represents the form of traditional dance that communicates cultural stability and continuity to its performers and audience. However, at the height of Athenian influence on Delos, local resistance is detectable, including a petition in 343 BC protesting the issue at Delphi.³⁶ Space does not allow for a thorough examination here, but it is important to note that far from expressing a uniform notions of the past, this period in fact saw a bolstering of differentiated, Delian, collective memories.³⁷ In this context we should be aware that the annual commemoration of Theseus in the *geranos* dance, may have been experienced as a contentious act from some Delians in attendance.

Cultural Memory is based on notions of shared origin, yet the Thesean *theoria* evoked an episode that emphasized the centrality of Athens in the foundational history and cultic landscape of the island.³⁸ How much this aligned or contended with Delian concepts of their past would of course vary, yet it certainly held the potential to differentiate the audience as based on the experience of contemporary power relations. In fact, evidence that this *theōria* had become conceptually linked with expressions of Athenian control on the island, is perhaps hinted at in the eventual retirement of the Thesean ship, which coincides with the establishment of Delian independence in 314 BC. While the performative aspects and physical setting would likely have

³⁵ Rutherford 2013: 304-305; Kowalzig 2007: 81-83.

³⁶ Constantakopoulou 2016: 127-8; Buckland 2001: 1; Hutcheson 2009: 865.

³⁷ Constantakopoulou *ibid*; See also Schachter 1999: 172-74.

³⁸ Assmann 2012: 34-41.

been familiar to a large portion of the audience, the *geranos* would enable a re-generative interaction with the collective memory of Theseus.

Research on embodied cognition has indicated how in observing dance, sensorimotor areas of the brain are activated.³⁹ In essence, audience members can mirror the movements of the dance both mentally and within their muscles. For the audience, the *geranos* communicated the memory of Theseus' foundational dance both in relation to what would have been their prior semantic knowledge of the event, but also through an embodied mirroring. However, at the level of spectator, it has shown that the experience of ritual is differentiated through familiarity with active participants.⁴⁰ For audience members that know performers, empathetic mirroring and synchronized arousal on mental, physiological, and emotional levels can take place. The stimulation of emotive/physiological arousal again aligns with the conditions of cognitive resource depletion, which would impact the creation of perceptual memory in members of the audience more attached to the performers. While not as strong as the forms of resource depletion experienced by the dancers, such synchronization would facilitate the adoption of collective episodic memories after the event through guided interpretation and gossip. While it is of course impossible to reconstruct the specific relationships between the performers and audience of the *geranos*, those most likely to share the forms of familiarity that allow for synchronized arousal in ritual would be the other Athenian members of the *theoria* and those serving as *amphiktionos*. I do want to dismiss the fact that non-Athenians may also have experienced the so-called mirroring effect in

³⁹ Bläsing et al 2012; Sevdalis and Keller 2011.

⁴⁰ Konvalinka et al 2011: 8514-19

watching the *geranos*, but simply underline that familiarity greatly supports it.

A very important consideration here is how the *geranos* was viewed by its audience. If the statue of Aphrodite did in fact play a part in the dance, then a general movement across the sanctuary from east to west is suggested: going from either the Great Temple of the Athenians, which are its argued locations during the Classical era, towards the *keraton*.⁴¹ This prelude and possible procession would be visually available to a wide audience.

However, whereas the altar had stood out in the open throughout its long history, during the fifth-fourth century BC it became housed within an apsidal building that was constructed under Athenian direction.⁴² While dancing around the outside of a temple is specifically associated with Delia held in Attica by Theothrastus, if we assume that *geranos* was actually performed around the *keraton* inside the apsidal building, then a clear segmentation of who could actually see the dance would occur.⁴³ A rough measurement of the internal space of this building comes to about twenty by eighteen meters, which if we take account of space taken up by internal columns, the altar and the space needed to perform the dance, suggests a number of about 150 people able to view the dance. The larger *theōric* group would most certainly have formed part of this audience, as would Athenian amphictyonic members, Delians and other attendees. However, this very likely made up a small portion of the people gathered, suggesting that the visual consumption of the *geranos* would have been framed by spatial and visual exclusivity.

⁴¹ Constantakopoulou 2007: 41-2.

⁴² Bruneau 1970: pp.19–23.

⁴³ Polemon fr. 78 Preller = Theophr. fr. 119

What does this tell us about how collective memories were generated by viewing/not viewing the dance? For those Athenians within the building, the forms of synchronized arousal and post ritual episodic memory would be more likely to occur. Likewise, while the *keraton* altar was a famous Delian mnemotope⁴⁴ outside of Theseus' landing on the island, on the occasion of the *geranos* it was consumed through an Athens-centric commemoration, physical space and audience.⁴⁵ For those both familiar and new to this ritual, the visual and physical segmentation would generate an obvious exclusivity in who, and how, the Cultural Memory of Theseus on Delos was recalled. Indeed, for those Delians and other non-Athenian attendees during the fifth–fourth centuries BC, this separation would have emphasized the wider claims Athens made on the foundational past of the island. While Theseus was remembered on Delos, it was as an emblem of Athens.

This brief survey of the *geranos* dance has indicated several conclusions. By approaching the dance through a consideration of its sensory, spatial, and cognitive experience, we are afforded with a clearer idea of how it would generate both collective episodic and cultural memory. In its practitioners' cognitive resource depletion and deprivation would have allowed for both pre-installed memory schema to dominate its experience, while also allowing for post-ritual interpretation and episodic memory construction. For the audience, those familiar with the dancers would have likely experienced synchronized arousal which negates precise perceptual memory and demands the construction of group episodic memories after the ritual. The physically segmented experience of attending or being able to

⁴⁴ Provisionally defined as any chronotopic motif which manifests the presence of the past.

⁴⁵ Marks 2016: 164-169.

actual view the dance, would also have emphasized Athenian claims on the cultural memory and early history of Delos.

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